DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 287 872 TM 870 598

AUTHOR Trautner, Hanns Martin
TITLE The Significance of the Appearance-Reality Distinction for the Development of Gender Constancy. Nr. 7, 1985/1.
INSTITUTION Munster Univ. (West Germany). Psychological Inst.
SPONS AGENCY Volkswagen Foundation, Hanover (West Germany).
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Toronto, Canada, April 25-28, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Child Development; Cognitive Tests; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Sex Differences; *Sexual Identity; Social Cognition; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Gender Constancy; *Reality; West Germany

ABSTRACT

Attainment of gender constancy is commonly asserted if gender is judged invariant despite superficial opposite-sex transformations, such as in hairstyle, clothing, or behavior. This notion suggests that the distinction between appearance and reality is crucial for gender constancy understanding. Four tasks requiring differentiation between appearance and reality and a gender constancy test were administered to 130 West German boys and girls aged 4 to 9 years. The experimental design controlled for feedback effects and effects of sequence of test administration. All subjects (N=56) who achieved gender constancy solved all of the appearance-reality-distinction tasks correctly. All subjects (N=37) who failed at least in one of the latter tasks were found to have no gender constancy understanding. The subjects who reliably discriminated between appearance and reality obtained high gender constancy scores regardless of age. No feedback or sequence effects could be observed. Results indicated that the distinction between appearance and reality is a necessary, though not sufficient, developmental prerequisite of gender constancy understanding. The appearance-reality distinction develops at an earlier age than gender constancy understanding. Furthermore, when a reliable appearance-reality distinction exists, higher gender constancy scores can be observed regardless of age. (Author/MDE)

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ENTWICKLUNG UND ZUSAMMENHANGSMUSTER VON MERKMALEN DER GESCHLECHTSTYPISIERUNG IM KINDESALTER

Nr. 7 1985/1

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Hanns Martin Trautner

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Herausgegeben von: H. M. Trautner
Psychologisches Institut, Universität Münster
Lazarettstraße 23, 4400 Münster

Das Projekt wird von der Stiftung Volkswagenwerk im Schwerpunktprogramm Entwicklungspsychologie gefördert.

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The Significance of the Appearance-Reality Distinction for the Development of Gender Constancy

Hanns Martin Trautner

The paper was presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Toronto, 1985. The research was supported by a grant from the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk to the author.

I would like to thank Katharina Moraing and Martina Wessel for their help in running subjects and data analyses, and Klaus Franck for his drawing of figures. I am also very grateful to the children, parents, and teachers of the following kindergartens and schools for their cooperation: Hermann-Kindergarten, Theresien-Kindergarten, Grundschule Kinderhaus-West, Pötterhoek-Grundschule, all in Münster (FRG).

Abstract

Attainment of gender constancy is commonly asserted if (real) gender is judged invariant despite (superficial) opposite-sex transformations, such as in hairstyle, clothing, or behavior. Though this notion suggests that the distinction between appearance and reality is crucial for gender constancy understanding, only recently attention has been drawn to that problem (Trautner, 1982; Martin & Halverson, 1983).

Four tasks demanding to distinguish between appearance and reality and a gender constancy test were administered to 130 boys and girls aged 4 to 9 years. The experimental design controlled for feedback effects and effects of sequence of test administration.

All Ss (N = 56) who achieved gender constancy solved all of the appearance-reality-distinction tasks correctly. All Ss (N = 37) who failed at least in one of the latter tasks were found to have no gender constancy understanding. The Ss who reliably discriminated between appearance and reality obtained high gender constancy scores regardless of age. No feedback or sequence effects could be observed.

Our results evidence that the distinction between appearance and reality is a significant mediator of the development of gender constancy understanding.

Problem

Attainment of gender constancy is commonly asserted if (real) gender is judged invariant despite (superficial) opposite-sex transformations, such as in hairstyle, clothing, or behavior (Emmerich & Goldman, 1972; Slaby & Frey, 1975; Marcus & Overton, 1978; Martin & Halverson, 1983). Though this notion suggests that the distinction between appearance and reality is crucial for gender constancy understanding, only recently attention has been drawn to that problem (Trautner, 1982; Martin & Halverson, 1983).

The widely used tests of gender constancy, the Boy-Girl-Identity-Task by Emmerich & Goldman (1972), and the Gender-Constancy-Interview by Slaby & Frey (1975), do not consider the appearance-reality distinction in their method of inquiry. Also, there is no study that took separate measures of gender constancy and of the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality.

In contrast to its neglect in gender constancy research, to distinguish between appearance and reality is regarded an essential and universal developmental acquisition of childhood (Flavell, Flavell & Green, 1983).

In an earlier study (Trautner, 1982) that required Ss to make judgements about the apparent as well as the real gender identity of male and female figures, after effecting transformations of hairstyle and/or clothing, it had been found that the majority of preschool children referred to appearance features in answering both types of questions, while most of the older children correctly discriminated between appearance and reality questions.

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between the development of the appearance-reality distinction and gender constancy understanding by providing independent measures of the two variables. Our assumption was that the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality precedes gender constancy understanding.

A secondary aim of the study was to test if 1) the preceding confrontation with appearance-reality tasks, 2) receiving assentive and corrective feedback to answering those tasks facilitates correct answers to following gender constancy questions.

Method

Subjects

70 boys and 60 girls from 2 kindergartens and 2 elementary schools in Münster (FRG) participated in the study. Ss ranged in age from 3-8 to 9-5 years. Their social background was predominantly middle class.

Tasks

1. Appearance-Reality-Tasks (ART)

To test for appearance-reality distinction, four tasks were used:

--Line magnification

Black line on a white sheet of paper to appear looking longer under a magnifying glass

--Disguise of punch puppet

Punch puppet getting dressed with a ghost garment

--Changing of color

White square on black pasteboard changing its color after being covered with a red transparent foil

--Changing relative length of two sticks

Length proportion of two sticks changed by placing the longer one between acute angles, and the shorter one between obtuse angles

One point was given for each correct solution of a task (unchanged property or identity despite perceptual transformations). According to their resulting score, Ss were grouped into 'Non-realists' (0 points), 'Transitionals' (1-3 points), and 'Realists' (4 points).

2. Gender-Constancy-Test (GCT)

Gender constancy understanding was assessed by asking 21 questions to verbally and/or pictorially presented stimuli:

Identity (3 items)

e.g., Is this a man or a woman? -How do you know?

Stability (5 items)

e.g., When you grow up, will you be a mommy or a daddy?

Motive (7 items)

e.g., If a boy wants to be a girl, can he be?
If yes:
-How does this happen?
-Does he look like a girl now?

-Is he a girl now for real?

If no:

-Why is this not possible?

Constancy (6 items)

e.g., If that woman puts on these (opposite-sex) clothes

-Does she look now like a man or a woman?

-Is she now for real a man or a woman?

-How do you know?

One point was given for each correct judgement and/or explanation (maximum score = 21 points). Gender constancy understanding was conceded when the S solved all of the identity items and stability items and reached a total score of 19 or higher.

Procedure

Each child was individually tested by a trained experimenter. To control for feedback effects and for effects of sequence of test administration, Ss were allocated at random to one of three experimental conditions: 1) Appearance-Reality-Tasks with feedback administered before Gender-Constancy-Test; 2) Appearance-Reality-Tasks without feedback administered before Gender-Constancy-Test 3) Gender-Constancy-Test administered before Appearance-Reality-Tasks without feedback (see Table 1).

Results and Discussion

All Ss (N = 56) who achieved gender constancy solved all of the four appearance-reality tasks correctly. All Ss (N = 37) who

failed at least in one of the appearance-reality tasks had no gender constancy understanding. The remaining 37 Ss succeeded in the appearance-reality tasks, but did not reach our criterion for gender constancy understanding (see Table 2).

For those Ss who reliably discriminated between appearance and reality, no significant age differences in gender constancy scores emmerged. That is, regardless of age, 'Realists' obtained rather high gender constancy scores (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

A detailed item analysis of gender constancy answers revealed that differences between 'Realists' and 'Nonrealists'/ 'Transitionals' appeared most likely in constancy explanations, and less so in mere constancy judgements.

Information feedback on appearance-reality tasks and sequence of test administration (ART before vs. after GCT) had no significant effect upon gender constancy scores. Only for 'Realists' a slight positive effect of the preceding confrontation with the appearance-reality tasks upon gender constancy scores could be found.

Our results evidence that the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality is a necessary, though not sufficient, developmental prerequisite of gender constancy understanding. The appearance-reality distinction not only develops at an earlier age than gender constancy understanding, also, a reliable appearance-reality distinction given, high gender constancy scores can be observed regardless of age.

That the preceding confrontation with appearance-reality-tasks, and even giving corrective feedback, had no significant effect upon gender constancy scores (as well as, for the latter, upon ART-scores themselves), shows that children's answers to questions demanding a distinction between the apparent and the real identity (property) of objects are a valid indicator of their reality understanding, which is not to be accelerated through a brief experimental procedure.

Because of the demonstrated importance of the appearance-reality distinction for gender constancy development, future gender constancy research should take this fundamental characteristic of children's thinking into account.

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TABLE 1

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Group	Condition of test administration First	Second	Control for
1	ART with feedback	GCT	1 vs. 2: Feedback effects
2	ART without feedback	GCT	2 vs. 3: Sequence effects
3	GCT	ART without feedback	

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF CHILDREN WITHOUT GENDER CONSTANCY VS. WITH GENDER CONSTANCY BY ABILITY OF APPEARANCE-REALITY DISTINCTION AND AGE

AGE	NO GENDER CONSTANCY			GENDER CONSTANCY		
	Nonrealists (Score 0)	Transitionals (Scores 1-3)	Realists (Score 4)	Nonrealists (Score 0)	Transitionals (Scores 1-3)	Realists (Score 4)
4 - 5	6	23	10	0	0	6
6 - 7	0	8	18	0	0	22
8 - 9	0	0	9	0	0	28
TOTAL	6	31	37	0	0	56

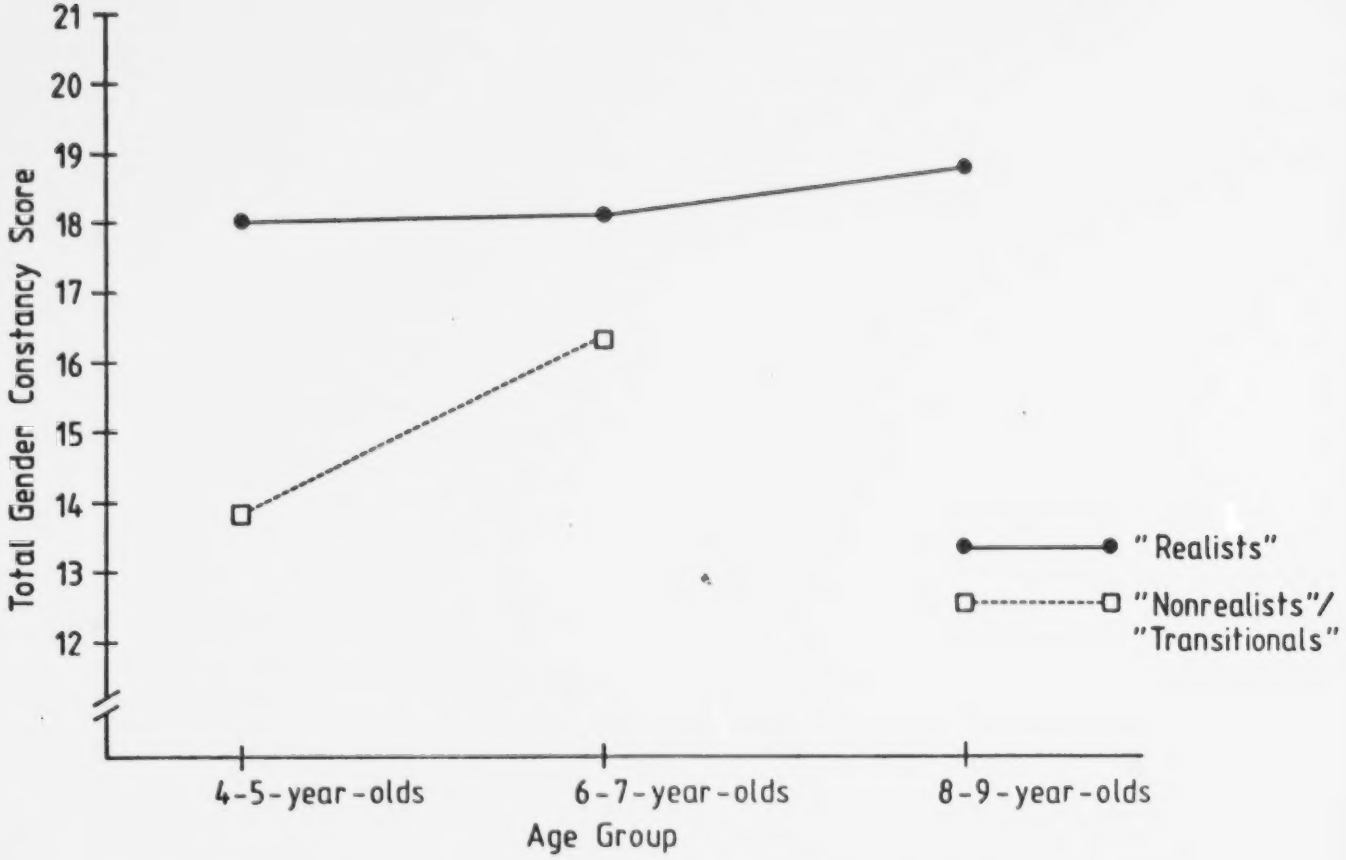

Fig. 1- Total gender constancy score as a function of age and appearance-reality distinction

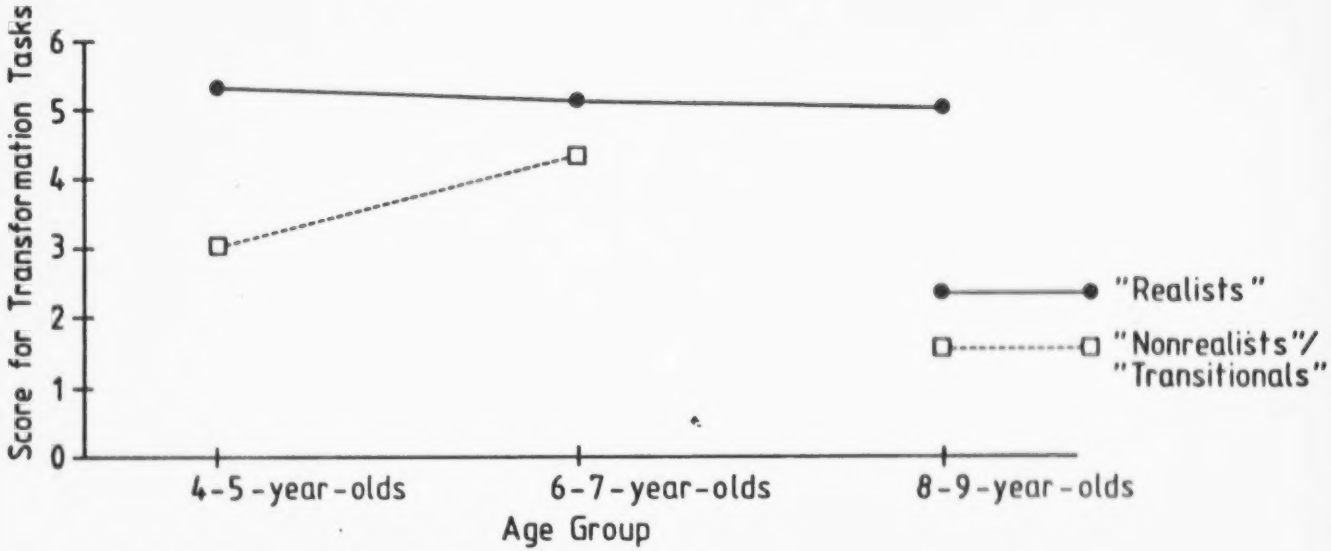

Fig. 2-Gender constancy score (perceptual transformation tasks) as a function of age and appearance-reality distinction